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ABSTRACT

The moral rules that come into play when researchers engage in qualitative inquiry are explored. Qualitative researchers first need to consider the aims of the research and how it is conducive to the educational good. A primary methodological consideration is to obtain the informed consent of those who participate in the research. The social context of the inquiry, the age of the participants, potential harm to the researcher, and the question of whether covert qualitative research can be justified are problems that must be considered. Another methodological concern is the relationship that ought to exist between the researcher and the participants. In addition, qualitative researchers are ethically bound to have a solid grasp of the philosophical and conceptual features of the work. A final question is that of the outcomes of the research and the use of the findings. (SLD)

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Ethical and Political Issues in Qualitative Research from a Philosophical Point of View.

1. I want to begin by sketching out the beginnings of a framework for dealing with some of the central philosophical issues which underpin ethical and political considerations in qualitative inquiry.

2. A distinction can be drawn between moral principles and moral rules.

   (i) Moral principles are general, few in number, and universal. Those having a direct bearing on qualitative research include the following -

   maximize good
   minimize harm
   pursue the truth
   respect for persons

   There are others. Promoting freedom might be one. Because they are general, moral principles, while providing some guidance to how we ought to conduct our lives, nonetheless are sufficiently vague as to require being cashed out as moral rules to suit the circumstances of localized situations.

   (ii) Moral rules tend to be particular, many in number, and tied to the specific. They translate moral principles into prescriptive courses of action about what we ought to.

   (iii) While the discussion which follows is developed against a backdrop of moral principles, the focus here will be primarily on those moral rules which come into play when researchers engage in qualitative inquiry. In particular, I shall begin with the aims of such inquiry, then dwell at some length on several methodological concerns, and finish with some thoughts on the outcomes of inquiry.

3. One thing qualitative researchers need to give more attention to is the question of aims: what exactly is the point in doing qualitative research? When conducted in an educational context, I think it is a legitimate question to ask how is such research conducive to promoting educational good? Unless qualitative inquiry addresses the connection between the accounts it gives of pupils, teacher's and administrator's lives, and the betterment in an educational sense of their lives, then it becomes increasingly difficult to justify this or any other sort of educational research. I would hazard a guess that much qualitative inquiry is motivated by less laudable aims.

4. Methodological matters are no less troubling. Some of them are familiar to you, but their problematic nature serves as a good reason to restate them once more.

5. The first is the demand by ethics committees and others for researchers, qualitative and quantitative alike, to secure the informed consent of those who participate in the research. Prima facie, this seems to be a reasonable requirement to place on qualitative researchers. People do have a right to know what is being asked of them, how a study will affect their lives, and so on. There is, therefore, an obligation placed

on the researcher to inform the participants about the inquiry and then, and only then, obtain their consent. There is some debate over just how binding this requirement should be. Clearly, it is invoked to protect participants, particularly young children, the mentally ill, the intellectually impaired, etc, from being harmed. In short, it is to accord them respect as persons. But the demand placed on qualitative researchers can be qualified in several ways.

(i) The demand for informed consent may be limited by the social context of the inquiry. A qualitative study conducted in a public place, such as a school playground, may not need to meet the strict requirements of informed consent. On the other hand, inquiry into people's private spaces carries with it the quite explicit need for informed consent, usually on each and every occasion of researchers contact. In semi-public locations, including classrooms, it is reasonable for pupils to be informed and then to give their consent, at least initially, and to be reminded from time to time of their research participation lest they forget.

(ii) The age of the participant's may also qualify their giving informed consent. At what age is a child capable of doing so? With young children, researchers, guided by teachers, will need to exercise a measure of judgement here. Where children are capable of giving informed consent they should be accorded the right to do so. Where they are unable to, because they are too young or lack the intellectual capacity to do so then parents, guardians or care-givers must exercise this right on behalf of and in the best interests of these children.

Problems can arise from time to time when the wishes of parents and their children collide: parents may consent yet the child prefers nonparticipation; parents may withhold consent contrary to the child's desire to participate. Presumably, in the first case the child prevails; in the second the parents do.

Of course, children are not the only participants who may be deprived of their right to give informed consent. It is not unknown for school principals to give their consent for qualitative researchers to enter classrooms without either informing or gaining the consent of the teachers concerned. This, I submit, is quite unethical, and it is incumbent on researchers to ensure that all of those involved in a study - pupils and teachers - have so consented.

(iii) There is a third qualification which may limit the application of informed consent. This is the well-known claim that by informing the participants and obtaining their consent their subsequent behaviour will no longer be that behaviour which would have occurred if they had not been so informed. There is some substance to this, for clearly people often do not say what they would have said or do what they would have done when being observed. On the merits of covert qualitative inquiry there appears to be no general rule to apply, and there is increasing resistance to it. But it does seem reasonable to conclude that in some cases covert studies are justified, and informed consent withheld, where it can be demonstrated in a convincing manner that the results of the study will generate considerably more good than harm to the

participants. The onus, however, is on the qualitative researcher to show that there is a very high probability of this being so. It is hard to see how this could be justified in an educational setting.

(iv) A fourth possible limitation on informed consent occurs where obtaining such consent puts the qualitative researcher in considerable or extreme personal harm. One can think, for example, of social anthropologists working in communities engaged in arm struggle - eg IRA in Northern Ireland. To demand of qualitative researchers that they obtain the informed consent of all members of the community in the face of possible punitive reprisals is to ask too high a price of qualitative researchers. Limited consent, albeit from key participants, yes; from all participants, certainly not if they are at the mercy of powerful forces. But there can be few, if any, similar circumstances in schools.

6. A second methodological concern is this: what sort of relationship ought to hold between qualitative researchers and those participating in their research. Given that, with few exceptions, such studies will be of an overt kind where informed consent is obtained, then it is not unreasonable to expect mutual trust. How this gets cashed out in actual practice will depend on a variety of things: the researcher's personality and the personalities of the researched; the public-private context of the study; the personal nature of the information or behaviour; and so on. The range of possible permutations precludes any clearcut rules - the best we can do is follow a general principle - treat the participants not as objects to be manipulated, not as means to our ends. Rather, treat them as persons, as moral agents, as ends in themselves. This I suggest, places an over-riding moral constraint on research methodology which qualitative researchers are duty-bound to abide by.

The relationship a qualitative researcher has with those participating in such rise gives rise to a fundamental question - whose side is the qualitative researcher on? As much as this is a moral question, it is also a political one. Whose interests are served by the doing of qualitative research is one question qualitative researchers cannot avoid, especially where competing interests (teacher - pupil, principal - teacher, research funder - participant) are cleaved by inequalities of power. When faced with such tensions, is the qualitative researcher motivated by educational or other reasons? If the teacher's involvement in future studies is to be sought then are the pupil's interests to be sacrificed? If the principal's co-operation is required for further inquiry, is the teacher's welfare put to one side? And if qualitative researchers depend heavily on external funding from benefactors whose interests are not always benign, will the researchers need for an income over-ride their moral duty to their research participants?

As with so many other matters, here too I can offer qualitative researchers no solace in a simple rule to follow. In the final analysis researchers can do no more than reflect upon the particular set of conditions they find themselves in and weigh these up according to the moral principles enunciated earlier, along with whatever rules they may be able to apply, and prudential consideration.

In the final analysis, qualitative researchers, no less than inquirers of other persuasions, cannot avoid issues of unequal institutional power relations embedded in the structural arrangements of the contexts they investigate. I take this to be a quite explicit denial of the possibility of neutrality on the part of the researchers. One cannot be neutral about whether one's research contributes to the educational betterment of those being studied.

7. I turn now to a further methodological issue. Some deny its ethical import, but I am of the persuasion that, like it or not, the ethical intrudes. I refer to the view that if qualitative researchers are to engage in good qualitative research which is of educational value to the participants, then there is, I submit, a requirement that qualitative researchers have a solid grasp of the conceptual, or, if you will, the philosophical, features of their work. To be sure, we can ride a bicycle well enough without knowing the physical theory which enables us to ride bicycles. This is not true of qualitative inquiry. Qualitative inquiry has built into it an understanding of what we are doing both in a technical sense of methodological procedures and in a conceptual sense - here I have in mind a reasonably sophisticated grasp of such things as ontology (what there is in the world) and epistemology (how to justify our knowledge claims about the world), objectivity and subjectivity in their various usages, structure and causality, relativism and criteria for judging, truth and knowledge, and so on. I make no claim that we are all agreed on such matters, for clearly we are not. But I do detect in some qualitative inquiry literature a variety of claims which, albeit made well-meaningly, are nontheless philosophically naive. Talk of multiple realities, epistemological relativism, and the absence of truth are just some of the wilder claims which are, not to put a too fine a point on it, symptoms of philosophical middle-headedness. It is a pity that widespread dissemination by those who should really know better has begun to bring qualitative inquiry into disrepute.

8. Finally, to my last point. What of the outcome of qualitative inquiry? How are the findings to be used by the researchers, participants and external parties such as funding agencies? First and foremost the qualitative researcher has a moral duty to protect the interests of the participants because they, often in positions of relative powerlessness, are the most easily harmed. True, as qualitative researchers we cannot always control the unexpected consequences which may arise out of making our findings public to the participants as well as a wider audience. But there seems to be no good reason for not trying to predict what sorts of consequences our research is more than likely to have. And it is here that the researcher's concern for truth, for trying to get it right, may well clash with other, moral principles.